

An Extensive Reading Approach to Language Teaching

"Reading, through which we can access worlds of ideas and feelings, as well as the knowledge of the ages and visions of the future, is at once the most extensively researched and the most enigmatic of the so called language skills." (Alderson 1998: 5)



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Reading is a complicated process of language activity and a major source of information. The nature of reading – how people learn to process textual information – has been investigated from numerous perspectives (by linguists, psychologists, educators and methodologists) for many decades.

Reading plays a critical role in applied linguistics research and in the day-to-day professional life of the language teacher. If teachers understand the nature of reading comprehension and learning from a text, they can undoubtedly improve the teaching-learning environment.

The syllabus for foreign languages lists reading as one of the main language activities to be developed since it is of great educational importance. For many students reading is by far the most important of the four skills, particularly in English as a foreign language. Certainly, if we consider the study of English as a foreign language around the world – reading is one of the main reasons why students learn the language.

We distinguish between the following types of reading skills:

Extensive reading: reading for pleasure with an aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. It is generally associated with reading large amounts of foreign language texts.

Intensive reading: reading carefully for an exact understanding of a text. Often refers to the careful reading of shorter, more difficult foreign language texts with the goal of complete and detailed understanding. It is necessary for contracts, legal documentation, application forms, etc.

Skimming: quickly looking through a text to get an idea of what the text concerns. It is used when reading magazines, newspaper articles, etc.

Scanning: locating specific information in a text. It is usually used in timetables, charts, etc.

In this paper we shall focus on extensive reading, its role in language learning, the

ways in which it can be employed in the EFL classroom and the benefits it brings to the classroom.

In the early part of this century, extensive reading took on a special meaning in the context of teaching modern languages. Pioneers such as Harold Palmer in Britain and Michael West in India worked out the theory and practice of extensive reading as an approach to foreign language teaching in general, and to the teaching of foreign language reading in particular (Palmer 1964; West 1955).

Extensive reading is most easily understood by contrasting it with intensive reading.

In a language class the reading skill has traditionally been taught by the close study of short passages followed by analysis of the language either for presenting lexical and grammatical points or for providing students with limited practice in various reading skills and strategies (**intensive reading approach**). By its nature intensive reading is a slow and tiring process and takes a lot of time with reading material involving a lot of new vocabulary and grammar. So students often get bored and discouraged. And this is natural because languages are too complex to learn properly by memorizing new vocabulary and grammar structures.

So, **extensive reading** (also called **pleasure reading, voluntary reading, sustained silent reading** or **uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR)**) is an alternative approach to teaching reading which allows the students to choose the books they read depending on their interests, and there is not always a follow-up discussion or work in class. In this way students are encouraged to read for pleasure and should become better readers.

Although some claim that students become good readers through reading and that teaching students reading strategies does not necessarily make them better readers, we strongly believe that explicit instruction can do a lot to improve the students' extensive reading skills. As a matter of fact a large number of students in the EFL/ESL world require reading for academic purposes, hence they need training in study skills and strategies for reading extensively.

The primary consideration in all reading instruction should be for students to experience reading as pleasurable and useful. Only then will they develop an eagerness to learn new skills to help them become better readers.

It has been estimated that immediate recognition of about 90 percent or more of the words in a running text is necessary for effective reading. As students read more extensively they will necessarily encounter words they do not recognize at sight. So, special instruction should be carried out to teach the students word recognition skills which will help them figure out unrecognized words when reading extensively which in its turn will lead to the improvement of reading comprehension.

Teaching word identification strategies will help language learners deal with unfamiliar words when reading. These are **word analysis** (comprising phonic and structural analysis) and **contextual analysis**.

Although **phonic analysis** is a useful skill, it can sometimes be confusing to beginning readers for a number of reasons. The English language has fifty-two symbols,

approximately forty-four sounds and several hundred symbol-sound relationships which testify to the considerable irregularity or unpredictability in symbol-sound correspondences. For example, the symbol *a* has a different sound in each of these words: *angel, pan, aloud, want, tall, dark*. Students may become overwhelmed and confused if they are taught too many symbol-sound correspondences. So, it is advisable that only the most common ones should be dealt upon.

Besides, there are very few phonics rules that occur with enough regularity to be taught as rules and are sometimes misleading because of so many exceptions. In spite of the problems mentioned above, instruction in sounding and blending is useful if applied to the decoding of words that cause students problems in actual text. Many low-achieving students may have learned the basic symbol-sound correspondences in isolation but may need help in applying this knowledge to the decoding of unfamiliar words when reading a connected text.

As students begin to learn to read, phonemic awareness becomes all-important, but as they progress in their reading skills, awareness of morphological structures, i.e. **structural analysis** becomes increasingly important and morphological awareness begins to surpass phonemic awareness in its importance for readers' decoding abilities.

Structural analysis is a useful technique for breaking a word into parts. The use of structural analysis to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words can be a valuable skill. For example, a reader may not know the meaning of the word *non-profit* but may recognize that the word is made up of *non* and *profit*. The reader may then be able to come up with an approximate meaning for the word because he or she knows that *non* means *not* and *profit* means *to make money*.

The student's ability to recognize the relationship between root words and derived words demands more from the student than automatic word-recognition and has little to do with the frequency of that word – but everything to do with that student's understanding of morphemes. So familiarizing students with inflectional and especially with derivational affixes enables them to recognize these word parts when attempting to decode unfamiliar words. In addition, there is a proven association between the ability to comprehend derivational affixes and the ability to fluently decode a word – as well as to reading comprehension in general. In fact, skilled readers are able to respond to the morphemes themselves and not just to familiar words.

Derivational morphemes, then, are the key to students' future vocabulary and ease of reading. Students find some types of derivational morphemes more challenging than others: so morphological training should focus on the derivational morphemes that cause many changes to the root word when attached.

As with phonic and structural analysis, the **contextual analysis** skills of students in terms of word recognition should also be assessed.

Using the context to help figure out unfamiliar words is a strategy good readers seem to use most often. Many low-achieving readers do not know how to use the context, although research suggests that they rely on the context more than good readers. So, they need direct instruction to develop this skill and use it consistently. The context is important because the meaning of a phrase or sentence is derived not from the

meaning of each individual word, but from these meanings combined with word-order and the meaning contributed by previous and successive word-groups.

Context clues are often helpful, but they are often not specific enough to predict the exact word. Often several choices are possible, however, when context clues are combined with other clues such as phonic and structural ones, accurate word identification is usually possible.

What Kind of Materials are Suitable?

The most important thing about choosing materials for extensive reading is that they should also be at a level appropriate to the students' reading ability (they should be 95% comprehensible to them and should contain very little new vocabulary and very little new grammar). This can be accomplished by giving a short passage from the material to be considered by students and asking them how many words they don't know. Depending on how honest the students are, the teacher will get a good idea of whether or not they could read the text. If the student finds the book too difficult to enjoy or too easy to get nothing out of it, the extensive reading procedure requires that the book be changed. So the teacher is indirectly involved in the process of reading, facilitating the provision of materials.

There is no agreement on how extensive the reading materials should be (30 pages an hour, 3 pages an hour, an hour per evening, 30 minutes per day?). The quantity of reading is not an absolute number of hours or pages but depends on the teacher's and the student's perceptions of how extensive reading differs from other reading classes; this will vary according to the type of program, the student's language proficiency, the nature of the text and other factors. Of course, quantity by itself does not make the extensive reading procedure. Consequently, there is no hard and fast rule for the amount of reading to be done extensively.

What are the Benefits of Extensive Reading?

- **It can increase the knowledge of vocabulary**

As a matter of fact only a small percentage of words are learnt through direct vocabulary instruction, due to the acquisition of words from reading. This suggests that traditional approaches to the teaching of vocabulary in which the number of new words taught in each class was carefully controlled (words often being presented in related sets), is much less effective in promoting vocabulary growth than simply getting students to spend time on silent reading of interesting books. It is better for a student to learn 20 new words while reading 20 pages of an interesting text, than it is to spend 20 minutes memorizing the same words.

- **It can lead to the improvement in writing skills**

A number of studies have shown that effective extensive reading will lead to the shaping of the reader's thoughts, which naturally leads many learners to respond in

writing with varying degrees of fluency. Elementary students may be able to write short phrases expressing what they most enjoyed about a book they read. With intermediate students, book reports may be used. At this level summary writing is also a valuable practice. Advanced students can be asked to write compositions, which are linguistically more demanding written responses to the reading material.

- **It can motivate learners to read**

Motivation is one of the key factors to the success of an extensive reading program. Reading materials selected for extensive reading programs should address students' needs, tastes and interests so as to motivate them to read the books.

- **It can consolidate the previously learned language**

Extensive reading of a high-interest material for both children and adults offers the potential for reinforcing the language learnt in the classroom.

Extensive reading has the potential to help English language learners become better readers and make improvements in other aspects of their English skills. Studies show that when students read extensively, they not only improve their reading fluency, but they also build new vocabulary knowledge, improve writing skills, expand the understanding of the words they knew before and, what is more important, take pleasure in reading for its own sake.

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Լայնածավալ ընթերցանության դերը լեզուների ուսուցման գործում

Ընթերցանությունը իր տարբեր դրսևորումներով առաջնային տեղ է զբաղեցնում օտար լեզուների ուսուցման ծրագրում, քանի որ այն ունի ուսուցողական մեծ նշանակություն: Սույն հոդվածում քննության են առնվում լայնածավալ ընթերցանության դերը լեզուների ուսուցման մեջ, դրա կիրառման ուղիները և թե ինչպես այն կարող է նպաստել լեզվի ուսուցման գործընթացին: Ուսումնասիրությունները ցույց են տալիս, որ երբ սովորողները լայնածավալ նյութ են ընթերցում, նրանք ոչ միայն կատարելագործում են իրենց ընթերցողական հմտությունները, այլև հարստացնում են իրենց բառապաշարը և ավելի դյուրին են ըմբռնում իրենց արդեն իսկ ծանոթ բառերի նոր նշանակությունները: